

DOING MORE TOGETHER

PARTNERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE FUNDA UDLALE NATHI PROJECT

INTRODUCING

F.U.N.

The **Funda Udlale Nathi** (F.U.N.) project aims to strengthen the professionalisation of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in South Africa by supporting educators through blended learning professional development focused on **Learning through Play**. The programme targets school and ECD centre leaders, practitioners, and teachers, and is being implemented in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

Central to the F.U.N. implementation approach is partnership between Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and government at the district level.

PURPOSE OF THIS LEARNING BRIEF

Targeted at F.U.N. CSO implementation partners and KZNDoE officials, this learning brief presents key lessons to support the ongoing strengthening of the F.U.N. partnership approach. The **key lessons** have been distilled from 32 interviews conducted with F.U.N. partners (CSO and KZNDoE representatives) together with insights emerging from project meetings and reflection sessions.

MAIN TAKEAWAY

The F.U.N. partnership approach has shown that structured, trust-based collaboration between government and CSOs in the ECD sector is a critical success factor for project implementation, legitimacy, and sustainability. When roles and responsibilities are explicit, communication is clear and coordinated, and commitment to the partnership by CSO and government representatives is visible, partnership thrives.

KEY LESSONS

1

THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH IS FOUNDATIONAL TO PROGRAMME SUCCESS

The partnership between district-level government and CSOs is central to effective implementation and sustainability of the F.U.N. intervention. Stakeholders consistently describe this partnership as collaborative, reliable, and mutually reinforcing. It delivers operational reliability, legitimacy with schools and ECD centres, and complementary capacity that neither government nor CSOs could provide alone.

In an under-resourced system, partnership between government and CSOs functions as a core delivery mechanism, enabling ECD professional development at scale and with credibility.

2

FOSTERING TRUST AND BUILDING NEW RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRATEGIC PROJECT OUTCOMES

In many districts the F.U.N. partnership approach has fostered trust and built new relationships between CSOs and KZNDoE. This is particularly significant in the ECD sector where CSOs historically worked more closely with the Department of Social Development than the Department of Education, necessitating the building of new partnerships. Stakeholders report improved relationships, professionalism, and a shared sense of purpose.

Building relationships of trust should be recognised as a strategic programme outcome. Trust enables joint problem-solving, accountability, and sustained collaboration.

3

CLEAR IMPLEMENTATION ROLES ENABLE SMOOTH DELIVERY

CSOs typically lead F.U.N. onboarding sessions, facilitation, and reporting; subject advisors and social workers recruit participants, issue circulars, secure venues, and monitor quality; KZN DoE Information Technology Officers (ITOs) provide critical digital support. In districts where this division of labour is clear, smooth coordination and delivery is evident.

The partnership approach works best when roles are clearly defined and jointly planned. Role clarity reduces duplication, confusion, and implementation gaps. Formal role clarification during the planning phase is a high-impact activity and sufficient time should be allocated for this.

4

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS MITIGATE CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS IN UNDER-RESOURCED SYSTEMS

CSO facilitation relieves pressure on district officials, while KZNDoE participation anchors implementation within formal structures and quality standards. Social workers and subject advisors strengthen reach across large districts.

The partnership approach increases reach, consistency, and quality without overburdening districts. Shared implementation responsibilities allow the system to do more with limited resources. Partnerships should be leveraged explicitly as capacity-amplification strategies.

5

CLEAR AND FREQUENT COMMUNICATION SUPPORTS SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS

Effective partnership coordination is dependent on clearly defined communication and coordination processes. Informal or unclear communication leads to challenges, particularly related to circulars and scheduling, and last-minute changes in arrangements disrupt attendance and project coordination.

Even strong partnerships are vulnerable without agreed and commonly understood communication and coordination structures and processes. Agreement on clear communication protocols, escalation mechanisms and contingency plans is essential.

6

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP STRENGTHENS LEGITIMACY AND PARTICIPATION

Schools and ECD centres engage more readily when the programme is clearly led and supported by KZNDoE officials. CSOs emphasised that government ownership strengthened participant motivation and improved attendance. Visible departmental ownership of the F.U.N. project was noted to boost credibility and participant engagement.

Perceived ownership shapes whether programmes such as F.U.N. are treated as optional initiatives or system priorities. Implementation should prioritise visible and active government leadership and ownership, not just endorsement.

7

ENGAGEMENT AND BUY-IN OF DISTRICT LEADERS IS DECISIVE

Where district leadership is engaged, partnerships are inclusive and effective. Where buy-in was limited at the leadership level, the partnership was less effective and implementation suffered amid competing priorities at the district level.

Active engagement of government stakeholders in leadership positions strongly shapes partnership performance. Leadership signals influence institutional commitment and follow-through at all levels. Targeted engagement of senior district officials is critical for sustainability of partnerships